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The Battle is the Lord's (Genesis 14:1-24)

-Martin Rizley-

3/09/2014

When you walk with the Lord by faith, there is no telling what experiences God may bring into your life to cause your faith to grow. We know that God is committed to the spiritual growth of His children, and for that reason, He may at times use painful trials as a means of pruning our faith, so that it bears fruit. Is that not what Jesus meant in John 15, when he said, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit." By these words, Jesus is letting us know that we ought not to expect an easy path in life. That's because our Heavenly Father's chief concern for us is not that our lives should be trouble free, but that they should be fruitful. Our Father loves us too much to let us grow spiritually barren. That is why He subjects our faith to testing, so that will not stagnate and cease bear fruit.

We see this principle of God's working illustrated in His dealings with Abraham, don't we? After calling Abraham to faith in Genesis 12, God subjected his faith to various trials, in order to cultivate it. First, He sent a famine on the land of Canaan which forced Abraham to go into Egypt for refuge. That was a test of his faith, for in Egypt, Abraham found himself surrounded by people whom he feared would kill him to take his wife. Instead of trusting in the Lord to protect him, he yielded to a spirit of fear and ended up dishonoring the Lord by cowardly actions. He failed to pass this test of faith, but instead of casting Abraham aside as a fruitless branch, God pruned him; He worked in him a spirit of deeper repentance, humility, and trust, and this showed itself in Abraham's dealings with his nephew Lot in Genesis 13. In this chapter, Abraham's faith was subjected to another test, as he was called to resolve a conflict between his own herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen. This time, however, instead of acting in a self-protective manner, Abraham entrusted his future entirely into the hands of God by dealing generously with his nephew and giving him "first pick" of the land. He passed this second test of faith, and as a result, God rewarded him by reassuring him of the certainty of His divine purpose: Abraham's descendants would be as the dust of the earth, and will inherit the whole of Canaan. God had pruned Abraham's faith through trials, and as a result, his faith was made more fruitful.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

In chapter 14, however, we see another test sent by the hand of God to prune Abraham's faith. This time, the test required Abraham to expose himself to even greater danger than he had faced in Egypt, for he was called now to go into battle as a 'freedom fighter' to liberate others.

Isn't it interesting how God subjects our faith to greater trials the more our faith grows? That's because He knows that we can never become spiritually mature unless our faith is challenged by circumstances that move us out of our comfort zone into places where we have no option but to look to God as our Protector and Provider. So he subjects our faith to trials, and because he knows just how much testing our faith can bear at every moment of our life, He metes out our trials accordingly. That's what we see Him do with Abraham in the passage before us this morning.

I. The Trial Abraham Faced

The trial Abraham faced in this chapter resulted from his nephew Lot's foolish choice to live in close proximity to the wicked inhabitants of the city of Sodom. You remember how in chapter 13, Lot was attracted by the beauty of the countryside around Sodom. He "lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of the Jordan," and he was so entranced by what he saw, that he chose to pitch his tent there, even though it meant he would be living in close association with a community described in Genesis 13 as "exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord." No doubt, Lot thought he was strong enough to resist the corrupting influence of Sodom; that is why he "pitched his tent as far as Sodom" (13:12). But he underestimated the seductive power of evil. Although at first, he kept a certain distance from the city, in the next chapter, we learn that he had moved right into the city (14:12) and was living in the midst of gross corruption.

Why did Lot make such a foolish choice? Because he put material interests over spiritual ones. He allowed himself to be led astray by the desire of his eyes. Now, we mustn't think of Lot as an unbeliever. The Bible states unequivocally that he was a righteous man, and that his soul was tormented every day by the lawless deeds that he saw (2 Peter 2:8). His faith was real, but it was weak, so Lot ended up basing his major life decisions on sight, rather than faith. He looked at the well-watered plain of the Jordan and thought, "Surely here I will never lack pasture for my flocks;" he looked at Sodom and thought, "Surely here I will never lack neighbors," His weak faith made him a conflicted soul-- torn between his desire to glorify God, on the one hand, and his desire to walk by sight, on the other. In the end, his double-mindedness cost him

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

everything he had, for he failed to consider that when you walk by sight, the visible things in which you put your trust may suddenly dissolve before your eyes.

That's exactly what happened to Lot. He chose to walk by sight, and the vision of material prosperity in which he trusted suddenly dissolved before his eyes and was replaced by a nightmare vision of death and destruction. He chose to throw in his lot with the people of Sodom, and he ended up suffering calamity with them.

The calamity described in chapter 14 is one that Lot could have seen coming, if only he had stopped to consider dangers he might face living in that city. Sodom was part of a pentapolis, that is, a group of five cities that were located in close proximity to each other. Each of these cities was governed by a local ruler, but the entire pentapolis had been subject for twelve years to the dominion of four more powerful cities located to the northeast of Canaan. In other words, the five cities on the plain of the Jordan-- Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar-- were all vassal cities, and that was evident from the fact that they had to pay hefty tribute each year to the four cities that were over them. Those four cities were located in a region that stretches across modern-day Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.

You can imagine that a master-slave relationship between cities-- which was common in the ancient world, by the way-- caused a great deal of resentment on the part of the cities that were enslaved, and that resentment could boil over at times in acts of rebellion. That's just what happened in the case of the five cities located on the plain of the Jordan. After twelve years of paying a heavy tribute to their overlords to the east, they decided they had had enough and so they refused to pay any further tribute to them. The very next year, the armies of those four eastern kings marched toward Canaan on a mission of vengeance. They swept down from the north along an ancient trade route known as "the King's Highway," conquering and pillaging other cities along the way. Then they traveled all the way to the desert south and west of the Dead Sea, in order to eliminate any danger of attack from the rear, before turning and moving north to attack the five cities on the plain of the Jordan. The leader of this assault was a king named Chedorlaomer, who was ruler of a city named Elam.

Incidentally, this is the first war mentioned in the pages of Scripture, and it was a war for which the five cities of the Jordan valley were unprepared.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Perhaps it was the exceedingly decadent lifestyle which the people lived that made them vulnerable to attack. The prophet Ezekiel describes the inhabitants of Sodom by saying they had "pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did they strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before me" (Ezekiel 26:49-50). When people live like that, they end up thinking only about the present moment and fail to plan for the future. Then, when calamity strikes, they are unprepared for it.

That appears to be what happened to these cities of the plain. They were so used to living a life of idle pleasure-seeking, that they failed to get ready for battle, even when they stopped paying tribute to their eastern overlords. So when at last those overlords came against them, they were totally unprepared to win a victory over them. Although the kings of those cities joined together and went out to meet the invading overlords in battle, they didn't have the least idea how to fight effectively against them. So they turned tail and ran. They all fled in the different directions heading for cover. In verse 10 we read, "Now the valley of Sidim was full of asphalt pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; some fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains." The asphalt pits mentioned here were pits of black tar, bubbling and oozing out of the ground like quicksand. They presented a hazard to anyone traveling in that area, for you could be swallowed up by these pits if you happened to take a wrong step. Apparently, the inhabitants of these five cities were so terrified by the invading armies, some of them failed to watch their steps as they were fleeing in panic, and they ended up falling to these pits of black ooze. Some may even have thrown themselves deliberately into these pits, rather than be tortured cruelly by these attackers.

Moses gives us very little detail about the battle that took place. All we know is that the four kings from the east defeated the five kings of the Jordan river valley completely. They stole whatever they could from the cities they had conquered, put some of the populace in chains to serve as slaves, and started to head back home. You can imagine how Lot was regretting at this point the fact that he had ever moved into Sodom.

I wonder how we can read a passage like this and not tremble for our own nation, for every day, it seems, we are bearing a closer resemblance to Sodom and Gomorrah. Our own government is actively promoting sodomy through the laws it is passing and the propaganda it is promoting in the public schools. Moreover, our own president by an abuse of power is attempting to use our

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

military as a laboratory for promoting his evil social agenda of normalizing sexual perversion in the culture, with devastating results. As a result our military is becoming increasingly decadent, with a declining morale that poses a security threat to our nation-- should that not disturb us? Of course it should! It should cause us to plead with God for mercy on our nation, lest we end up sharing in the fate that befell the cities located on the plain of the Jordan river, and become like them in the end, a smoking ruin.

B. Abraham's Response to This Trial

Until this point in chapter 14, we have heard nothing about Abraham, and that's because he was far away from the noise and heat of the battle. But when someone who had escaped the slaughter came to Abraham and reported that his nephew Lot had been taken into captivity, he sprang into action. In this, we see further evidence of God's work in the heart of Abraham. He could have taken the attitude that his nephew had made a foolish choice by moving into Sodom, so now he would have to bear the consequences of that choice. But Abraham's heart was so filled with a sense of God's wonderful grace, that he could not take such a hard attitude toward his nephew. He loved him, and felt pity for him. After all, this was his "brother"-- related to him not only physically, but spiritually as well. They were both worshippers of the one true God, brothers in the Lord; so Abraham could not turn a blind eye to his nephew's plight. He knew what he had to do. He must strap on his sword, gather together a band of freedom fighters and go in pursuit of this foreign army, in order to rescue his nephew from captivity.

We learn from Abraham's prompt response in a moment of crisis something very important about the life of faith. When a man is walking with God habitually, trusting his promises and living his life on the foundation of those promises, as Abraham was doing at this time, he will be ready to respond rightly to the call of duty when it comes. When Abraham got out of bed that morning before a messenger came to bring him news of Lot's captivity, he had no idea of what was going to happen that day. He had no idea that before the sun set, he would be making plans to go into battle. But because he was living a consecrated life before God, he was prepared to do the right thing when unforeseen events suddenly called him to perform an act of heroism.

In himself, Abraham had every reason to feel weak and helpless. After all, the army of these foreign kings had just defeated the combined army of five Canaanite cities. He was up against formidable enemies; well-trained, well-

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

organized and well-armed. They were violent and cruel and showed no compassion to those whom they conquered. From a human perspective, it would have been easy for Abraham to succumb to a spirit of fear, and to start making excuses to justify his non-involvement in the whole affair.

What strengthened him to do the right thing, however, was his faith in God. He had learned from past experience to trust in the absolute certainty of God's promises. God had promised to make of him a great nation and to bless the whole world through his seed. He had promised to give his seed the land of Canaan as an inheritance. So Abraham reasoned thus: "God's promises to me cannot fail; therefore, His hand of protection will be upon me, even in the hour of battle. I can trust the Lord to watch over me and to deliver me from the hand of my enemies, for His purpose concerning me will surely be fulfilled" It was this trust that Abraham had in the Lord and His Word that enabled him to do what was right, without worrying about his personal welfare. What a different attitude we see in him now than when he was in the land of Egypt. As Kent Hughes says, "In Egypt Abraham had fallen to distrust and smallness, now he was living in profound trust and an elevation of heart."

As God dealt with Abraham, so he deals with every believer. As we walk in daily dependence on the Lord and cling to the certain promises of His Word, God brings into our life from time to time unforeseen changes that pose a challenge to our faith. This is quite necessary for us to become spiritually mature, for as Warren Wiersbe says, "There can be no growth without challenge, and there can be no challenge without change. If circumstances never changed, everything would be predictable; and the more predictable life becomes, the less challenge it presents. . . The life of faith presents challenges that keep you going-- and keep you growing!"

Abraham's faith bore the fruit of generosity in chapter 13, but now it bears another fruit which is just as essential to a fully formed Christian character, and that is the fruit of courage. Abraham was compelled by circumstances to take bold and decisive action. In this, too, we see an illustration of God's work in the life of every believer. God not only wants us to be unselfish and generous in our dealings with all men, but courageous, as well, for thereby, we reflect more radiantly the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was the bravest man who ever walked on planet earth. The more we trust in the Lord and His promises to us, the more like Christ we become.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

That is what I find so beautiful about this passage, for as Abraham responded in faith to God's call by rescuing Lot, he reflected the character of our Lord Jesus Christ and even typified the Lord Jesus in many ways. For example, Abraham acted freely on his own initiative out of love for his nephew Lot; likewise, our Lord Jesus acted freely on his own initiative out of love for us. Abraham undertook a rescue mission to do for Lot what he could never have done for himself; likewise, our Lord Jesus undertook a rescue mission, to do for us what we could never have done for ourselves. Both Abraham and Christ acted bravely to save people from a state of captivity. But there the similarity ends; for though it took courage for Abraham to do battle with enemy armies to save Lot, it took much greater courage for the Lord Jesus to do battle with the forces of darkness to save us. In saving Lot from slavery, Abraham had to expose himself to the threat of death; but in saving us from the slavery of sin, Christ had to undergo the sentence of death Himself, in order to remove that sentence from us. He had to endure the shameful death of the cross, in order to cancel our debt and to remove from us the righteous wrath of God on account of our sins. Both Abraham and Jesus were successful in their mission, but the victory Christ won for us is of infinitely greater value than the victory Abraham won for Lot.

God wants us to be assured of the fact that, just as He supplied Abraham's every need to carry out the mission on which he was sent, so He will supply our every need, as well, as we seek to do His will.

What needs did Abraham have in this passage that God supplied?

1) Well, first Abraham needed courage to overcome fear-- I have already pointed this out. He needed courage, and courage came to him from God as a gift of grace, as the Lord worked in him a spirit of boldness. Because Abraham believed God, he was able to march bravely into battle despite his fears; and he will do the same for us as well, as we entrust our lives to Him (2 Timothy 1:7). Let us remember that courage is not the absence of fear, but the presence of faith. Abraham had faith, and that is what enabled him to look death in the eye and move straight forward, though it may have been with his hands trembling and his stomach twisting itself into knots.

A story is told of a brave soldier in Napoleon's army named Marshall Hay. One morning before going into battle, Hay's knees were quaking so badly, he could hardly mount his horse. When he was finally in the saddle, he shouted, "Shake away, knees, you would shake worse than that if you knew where I am

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

taking you!" Now that is courage, and that is the virtue that Abraham exhibited by virtue of his faith in God.

2) Second, Abraham needed men to join him in this venture-- Abraham knew that he could not go into battle alone. He needed a group of brave men on whom he could rely to go with him into the fray of the battle. That is what he needed, and that is just what God supplied. We read in verse 14 "when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan."

Notice how perfectly suited these men were to perform the task that was required. First, they were loyal men, for they were born in Abraham's house; and since they were his servants from birth, they were likely to be loyal and dependable to him. Then, too, the men whom God gave Abraham were trained men, meaning they knew how to handle weapons and how to follow orders as soldiers in an army. This suggests that Abraham at an earlier date had prepared these men for battle just in case a situation ever arose like the one they were now facing. Because Abraham understood the violent character of the world in which he lived, he had the foresight to prepare his household for self-defense in the case of unprovoked attacks by marauding bands of thieves. He was a man of peace, but he was prepared for war; and as the news of Lot's plight reached his ears, that readiness paid off. Finally, these men were armed men, for Abraham had enough swords to distribute to them all. That means he had a pretty extensive armory, since they were over three hundred men involved in this army. We see here again the evidence of Abraham's prudence and foresight. Abraham was prepared for armed conflict; and the Lord supplied him with the men he needed, to be a powerful fighting force.

3) Third, Abraham needed wisdom to know how to obtain his objective-- The third thing Abraham needed to go into battle was wisdom to know how to obtain his objective, and the Lord provided that as well, by giving Abraham a strategy. Although he was outnumbered, Abraham decided to launch a surprise attack by night to take advantage of the protection provided by darkness. Not only that, he decided to confuse the enemy troops by dividing his forces and attacking them from several directions at once. This strategy worked, for the startled troops panicked and fled into the dark of the night, leaving behind all the spoils of war they had taken. Notice that Abraham didn't stop pursuing them when they fled the scene. He continued to go after them far as the city of

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Hobah, which was to the north of Damascus in Syria. He did this to make sure they were gone for good, and would not be coming back any time soon.

5) Fourth, Abraham needed God to crown his efforts with victory-- One final thing that Abraham needed the Lord to do was to crown his efforts with victory; and the Lord did that, not only by enabling him to recover all the material goods which the foreign armies had stolen, but also by restoring to him his nephew Lot, together with all the other people who had been taken into captivity.

How overjoyed Abraham must have been to see the expression of gratitude on his nephew's face. How thankful they both must have been to contemplate the mercies of the Lord in granting such a resounding victory.

Next week, we are going to consider the aftermath of this battle, and what that further reveals to us about the character of Abraham. But this morning I want to conclude by reminding us all how thankful we should be that the God of Abraham is our God.

You see, when we ask the question, how was Abraham able to exhibit such courage and fortitude in the face of such a terrifying crisis, the answer is, not because of any natural virtue in Abraham himself, but because of the presence of the Lord within him. In himself, Abraham didn't have a brave bone in his body. He was naturally a coward. We see his cowardice on full display in Egypt, when he placed his own wife in danger in order to save his own neck. That was Abraham in his natural condition, acting out of the power of the flesh. In this chapter, we see Abraham in the power of God's Spirit, and that makes him an altogether different man. The bravery he exhibited didn't come from him, but from the Lord within him. Because Abraham walked by faith, God was faithful to strengthen him for heroic service when it was needed, and he will do the same for us, as well. He will enable us to do things far beyond our natural abilities. He has done so for his servants often in the past, and will he fail to do so in the future?

I have just been reading about a courageous German pastor named Paul Schneider, who in the 1930's was faithful to bear bold witness against the Nazi regime. Perhaps more than any other German pastor of that era, Schneider exhibited amazing boldness in denouncing the demonic character of Hitler and his pagan philosophy that was leading the German people astray.

One biographer writes that while Schneider "sought nothing more than to serve faithfully as pastor of a small village Reformed church, God chose to place

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

him squarely in the path of the Nazi state. . .While Schneider did not seek conflict, neither did he run from it if the witness of the Gospel was at stake. He refused to ring the church bell, as required, to signal the beginning of Nazi meetings. He would not return the Nazi stiff armed salute." Schneider also condemned the Nazi movement in his sermons for its perversion of the gospel. In one sermon he condemned the Nazis for placing "blood and race and the history of the people as a source of revelation next to God's word, next to his will revealed to us in the words of Scripture alone, next to Jesus as the unique Mediator between God and man."

Schneider went so far as to urge church discipline against a member who withdrew his son from a catechism class in order to enroll him in a Nazi school, to be indoctrinated in Nazi doctrine. When Schneider refused to back down on this matter of discipline, he was arrested and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. "Beaten and humiliated, Schneider never wavered in his Christian testimony" writes his biographer. "When he refused to remove his cap at the prisoner's assembly when the Nazi anthem was played, Schneider was beaten severely, and placed in solitary confinement. A fellow inmate at Buchenwald remembers that day clearly."

"Wholly without fear, he bore witness of his Christian faith to the SS. In this frankness, he was probably unique in Germany. He called the devil by his name: murderer, adulterer, unrighteous, monster. Throughout his imprisonment, in which he presented the grace of Christ together with a call to repentance, Schneider was exposed alternately to severe bodily tortures, humiliations, and agonies... heavy beatings, dangling up off the floor at the window crossbars... Schneider was utterly tireless, always calling out words of Scripture to other prisoners, especially mornings and evenings at the count for roll call."

On a January morning in 1939, when two prisoners who had escaped and been captured were murdered in the cell block, Schneider called out during the roll call "In the name of Jesus Christ, I bear witness to the murder of the prisoners," before he was silenced and subjected to a new round of beatings.

Throughout his imprisonment, he continually bore witness to the truth of the gospel, fearlessly accusing his captors and encouraging his fellow inmates by shouting out Scriptures from his cell window. He refused to stop bearing witness to the truth of the gospel, though it resulted in great personal suffering.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

Finally, on July 18, 1939, he was murdered by the Nazis by means of a lethal injection. His body was returned to his home town, and despite Gestapo surveillance, hundreds of people attended his funeral. One of the pastors preached at the grave side said to his congregation, "May God grant that the witness of your shepherd, our brother, remain with you and continue to impact on future generations and that it remain vital and bear fruit in the entire Christian Church."

How was Paul Schneider able to show such courage in the face of persecution? How was it that he refused to succumb to a spirit of fear, as Abraham also refused to turn back from fear? Not because of natural virtues he possessed, but because of the presence of Jesus Christ in Him.

How thankful we should be to know that the same Lord who was in Abraham, who was in Paul Schneider, is in us as well, and He will make us bold and courageous in the day of trial. Let us pray for grace to live faithfully for Him every day, glorifying the Lord in all the mundane routines of daily life. Then, when the hour of crisis comes, and we are called to exhibit Christ like heroism, we will not fail. The Lord will glorify himself through us, and establish us in His truth. The battle is the Lord's, and He will equip us for that battle by supplying our every need. Only let us trust His word and never doubt for a moment His faithfulness to us. Then we will be bold and faithful witnesses for Him. Oh, may we be eager to proclaim His glory, both now and always. Amen.